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SUBJECT: HONORING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SIERRA LEONE

¶1. Summary: Following presidential and parliamentary elections in 2007, a committee led by two NGOs -- Search for Common Ground and Enhancing Interaction and Interface Between Civil Society and the State to Improve Poor People's Lives (ENCISS) -- convened a 2-day symposium, The Honoring Women Initiative January 3-4 to honor the efforts of women from throughout Sierra Leone who participated in the elections as candidates and political activists. The symposium was designed to encourage participation in the upcoming July 2008 local elections and was supported by Embassy and USAID. The First Lady of Sierra Leone presided at the event. She was joined by the President at the closing to honor the many women who were active in civil society and who had competed for political office. Competed surveys by attendee reflected a renewed energy and commitment to women's political participation in Sierra Leone. The challenge will be to carry the positive momentum forward to improve women's political engagement. End Summary.

¶2. With funding and support from Irish Aid, the National Democratic Institute (USAID funded), Search for Common Ground (USAID funded), DFID, Oxfam, UNIOSIL and other local NGOs, the symposium started with an acknowledgement of the need to celebrate the efforts of women who stood for office in 2007 and stressed the importance of increasing women's political participation to ensure the rights, protection and improvement of the role of women in Sierra Leone. The First Lady chaired the opening event, and speakers including the Minister for President Affairs, Alpha Kanu speaking on behalf of President Koroma, UNIOSIL Officer in Charge Hagoss Gebremehdin, Search for Common Ground Director Ambrose James and the Charge.

Developing the Symposium Agenda

¶3. The initial impetus for the symposium began with a discussion, hosted at the Embassy, of the need to recognize and honor National Elections Chair Dr. Christiana Thorpe for her personal courage and leadership in ensuring a successful outcome for the 2007 national elections. As Minister Kanu noted, the Sierra Leone electoral outcome could have been a shambles "but for the grace of God and Christiana Thorpe." Not only was Dr. Thorpe recognized for her unwavering commitment to free and fair elections, but, she became a symbol for all Sierra Leoneans of the vital role women must play in the country's future. From that that initial desire to honor her historic contribution, grew a symposium to increase women's participation in governance by recognizing and honoring women political activists and candidates who play a vital role in their communities and were particularly active during the elections. The outcomes of the symposium were to encourage increased women's participation in the 2008 local elections, honor the contribution of women in the electoral process, foster solidarity among women's networks, and engage government on priority issues for women in Sierra Leone.

¶4. Frances Fortune, Director of Search for Common Ground Africa and Jeannette Eno, Director of ENCISS, conceived and developed the symposium agenda. Jeannette Eno led the coordinating committee to include key civil society Sierra Leonean women activists, NGOs and international partners. The U.S. Embassy and USAID participated in the steering committee and provided material support.

Impressive Participation Honors and Spurs the Women's Agenda

¶5. The symposium was attended by over 300 women from all districts of Sierra Leone and included among them many successful and unsuccessful political candidates in the national elections. The seminars, presented by local and international political activists including Dr. Christiana Thorpe covered topics ranging from Women in Peace and Security to Decision Making at the Local and National Levels. The closing ceremony, chaired by First Lady Sia Koroma with President Koroma, included the presentation of awards to all women candidates from the 2007 elections. Three political activists from each of Sierra Leone's districts were also singled out for their community commitment to improving the lives of those around them. Honorees included civil society activists, health care providers, teachers, agriculturists, peace activist, entrepreneurs, micro enterprise developers, performers, and artists. The event also honored current and former women government ministers.

¶6. Although the event will not be annual, the organizers intend for the symposium to be a jumping-off point for future engagement and interaction among women around the country, particularly in the lead up to the local elections. The event encouraged networking, sharing of ideas, and solidarity. Sustaining that momentum through the process and beyond will be an important goal for the Embassy and USAID electoral support. Ongoing programs will help to build on networks developed at the symposium. USAID, through NDI, IFES and Search for Common Ground, is already working to translate the women's local election Action Plans into concrete initiatives,

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hopefully resulting in a significant increase in new women local government officers.

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